

VZCZCXR09124
PP RUEHDBU
DE RUEHMO #0585/01 0231604
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 231604Z JAN 06
FM AMEMBASSY MOSCOW
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 9543
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE
RUEHXD/MOSCOW POLITICAL COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 000585

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/23/2015

TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL PINR RS

SUBJECT: PUBLIC CHAMBER BEGINS ITS WORK

Classified By: Minister-Counselor for Political Affairs Kirk Augustine.
Reasons: 1.4(B/D).

¶11. (C) SUMMARY. The Public Chamber began its work on January 22, choosing Academician Yevgeniy Velikhov as its head and picking chairpersons of the seventeen commissions that are expected to do the bulk of its work. President Putin, presiding at the opening plenary, laid out priorities for the Chamber, including fighting extremism, promoting objective media, helping with the implementation of his national priorities agenda, and most notably, working on implementation of the controversial NGO legislation. While the Chamber clearly appears to be a project the Kremlin intends to use to manage civil society, we do not believe it should be entirely written off in advance or ignored. END SUMMARY.

.
PUBLIC CHAMBER CONVENES, ELECTS A CHAIRMAN

¶12. (U) The Public Chamber officially began its work on January 22, holding its inaugural plenary session at the Kremlin with President Putin as host and active participant. The Chamber unanimously elected Kurchatov Institute President Yevgeniy Velikhov as its Secretary, the body's top leadership position. Sergey Katryrin, Vice President of the Russian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, was elected Deputy Secretary. The members also elected chairmen for the

SIPDIS

Chamber's seventeen commissions. In addition, the Chamber formed a Council consisting of the Secretary, the Deputy Secretary, and the commission chairmen. Given that the

SIPDIS

Chamber will meet in plenary session, according to a public chamber member, only four times a year, the commissions and Council are to play a pivotal role in the body's activities.

¶13. (C) The choice of Velikhov to chair the body had been widely expected. The seventy year old Velikhov is the winner of numerous scientific awards for his work as a physicist. By all indications, the Kremlin decided on him at least several weeks ago, when the names of other potential candidates to head the body began to disappear. Already in late December, Chamber member (and political analyst) Andranik Migranyan told us that Velikhov would surely become chairman, commenting that he is widely respected as a scientist and seen as an apolitical figure. The Embassy has dealt with Velikhov on a number of occasions, including when he has met with Department of Energy delegations. At those sessions, he has always been positive about bilateral cooperation. Velikhov is not directly involved in the nuclear security programs that DOE conducts at the Kurchatov Institute.

.
PUTIN LAYS OUT AN AGENDA

¶4. (U) Putin enjoyed center stage at the January 22 plenary. With Presidential Administration (PA) Deputy Head Vladyslav Surkov sitting to his right, Putin said that while he strongly supported the new body, it would meet much resistance, notably from Russia's bureaucracy. The Chamber would have to prove itself to the public, Putin argued.

¶5. (U) Putin then outlined key issues for the new body to examine. Condemning public figures who promoted extremism, Putin said that combating ethnic and religious hatred would be one priority for the Chamber. He identified promoting objective and independent media and implementing the national priorities agenda he unveiled late last year as other important priorities. Of particular note, Putin said that the Chamber should work on the new NGO legislation, including on resolving disputes that could arise in its implementation. Putin added that the Chamber could make recommendations for which organizations should receive the five hundred million rubles the state had set aside for funding NGOs.

.
COMMENT

¶6. (C) As it took shape over the past months, the Chamber has always faced suspicion that it would serve as a rubber stamp and a mechanism to coopt key figures in Russian civil society. By hosting its inaugural session and laying out an apparently significant agenda, Putin sought to strengthen the body's image and cast it as promoting democracy and civil society development in Russia. The fact that he hosted it and gave it its broad marching orders, however, highlights the extent to which the Kremlin in fact sees the Chamber as an instrument to control civil society from the top down. When Chamber members in December advocated a role in preparing the controversial NGO legislation, Putin swept that suggestion aside by signing the bill ahead of the body's inauguration, and he made clear at the opening session that

MOSCOW 00000585 002 OF 002

the Chamber should only see to its effective implementation.

¶7. (C) The Chamber is almost exclusively populated by pro-Kremlin figures, and its few relatively independent figures will have a difficult time pushing their own agendas unless the Kremlin approves them. Nonetheless, the Kremlin's manipulative creations are not always matched by its ability to control its creations (e.g., Rodina), and there has always been some indication in the case of the NGO law that Chamber members may at least on some occasions slip their leash. While skepticism about its role is abundantly justified, we do not believe it should be entirely written off in advance or ignored.

BURNS